DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 429 HE 033 027

AUTHOR	Fincher, Cameron
TITLE	When Universities Are Worthy of the Name. IHE Perspectives.
INSTITUTION	Georgia Univ., Athens. Inst. of Higher Education.
PUB DATE	1999-10-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Institute of Higher Education, Meigs Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1772; Tel: 706-542-3464; fax: 706-542-7588; Web site: http://service.uga.edu/ihe/.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Higher Education; *Institutional Characteristics; *Institutional Environment; Institutional Mission; *Institutional Role; Peer Institutions; *Reputation; *Universities; Upper Division Colleges

ABSTRACT

This monograph argues that university status should be conferred on colleges only when they have reached a specified level of achievement within their various academic programs, and that when changes are made in an institution's administrative structure and academic organization, something other than institutional aspirations should serve as the criteria. The essay defines some of the distinctive features of university status, including patterns of instruction, research, and service; recruitment and education of students capable of becoming scientists, scholars, and professionals; and the existence of facilities (libraries, laboratories, computer centers, museums) essential to a higher-level academic environment. Also noted are the significant differences between universities and other institutions on the applications and uses of knowledge, and the indicators of status and image. The essay concludes that a university is worthy of its name when: most of its constituencies appreciate its mission and role as an institution of higher learning; curricula include humanities and fine arts, physical and biological sciences, behavioral and social sciences, and professional or applied fields of specialization; governing boards represent the public interest; heritage, tradition, and current programs give a unique sense of purpose and meaning; and the university displays maturity and the capacity for continuing growth and development. (CH)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 442 429

IHE PERSPECTIVES OCTOBER 1999

WHEN UNIVERSITIES ARE WORTHY OF THE NAME

by Cameron Fincher

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

C. Fincher

1

HE033027

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

IHE PERSPECTIVES OCTOBER 1999

WHEN UNIVERSITIES ARE WORTHY OF THE NAME

by Cameron Fincher

> Despite Jefferson's hopes for the University of Virginia and Tappan's efforts at Michigan, the United States had no university worthy of the name until the opening of Johns Hopkins in 1876.
>
> W.H. Cowley, *Presidents, Professors, and Trustees (1980)*[1]

At a time when "the virtual university" is a household word, four-year public colleges aspire to be state universities, and private liberal arts colleges seek higher status to raise funds, no one should be surprised that technical schools are becoming two-year colleges. And in a nation where degrees are required for well paying careers, it is not surprising that colleges seek the title of university, even though status and prestige are yet to come.

Several states have organized two-tier systems of public higher education, with universities classified on one level and community colleges on the other. In Georgia, a three-tier system is in the making, with public universities, universities and state colleges, and two-year colleges as units of the University System of Georgia—and the eventual classification of technical *schools* as technical *colleges* under the State Department of Education. Private or independent colleges and proprietary schools seek revisions in their charters and become universities whenever feasible.

Given the frequency with which the titles of colleges have been changed, critics contend that institutions of higher education do not become universities simply by legislative acts or revisions in state charters. And skeptics might add that changes in titles are nothing more than changes in titles. Too often, perhaps, colleges are called universities as a means of solving problems unrelated to academic accomplishments.

Other critics suggest that university status should be officially conferred only when institutions reach a specified level of achievement within their various academic programs, services, and activities. Whatever that level of achievement, it should call for a fairly dramatic renewal of institutional purposes, mission, and policies. At the same time, there are significant differences new universities should have when compared to the larger group of institutions with common features. Both common features and significant differences should testify to the credibility of an institution's newly claimed status as a university.

Neither common features nor significant differences should preclude distinctive or unique characteristics that stem from the heritage and historical developments of each particular institution. All institutional characteristics—common, different, unique—should be considered in the planning and organizing that should take place prior to designation as a more comprehensive institution of higher learning.

In brief, when significant changes in the mission and role of institutions are implied by a well publicized change in title and/or

Institute of Higher Education, Meigs Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1772
Phone: 706/542-3464, Fax: 706/542-7588, http://service.uga.edu/ihe/

LB 03 C27

status, the evidence for those changes should not be dubious. And when highly significant changes are made in an institution's administrative structure and academic organization, something other than institutional aspirations should serve as criteria.

Distinctive Features

In their transition to university status, institutions of higher education should clearly identify the distinctive characteristics they have in common with older, well established universities. Among such common features should be institutional commitments and responsibilities signifying advancement in academic programs, services, and activities. *If* universities are gradually developed over a period of years and *if* they are the cumulative but concerted accomplishments of active constituencies, their stages of development should be a matter of record.

research & public service are often cited . . . as the most distinctive feature of American universities.

Among their common features, universities can claim *an effective blending of resources, capabilities, and expertise* in their commitments to instruction, research, and service. Although a convenient designation of institutional purposes and functions, the triad of teaching, learning, and serving is often emphasized to the detriment of another triad found only on university campuses: undergraduate, professional, and graduate education. Until recently, the most acceptable definition of a university would have been a "universe" of colleges offering a liberal education in the arts and sciences, with excellent opportunities for advanced study in the learned professions and graduate work leading to the Ph.D.

Remembering that the word "university" is derived from the Latin words *unus* and *verter*, we can appreciate the relevance of organized efforts "to turn as a unit or whole." We should insist, nonetheless, that *university is not defined by a single distinctive feature but by a distinctive pattern of instruction, research, and public service through general, graduate, and professional programs.* Thus, university status and prestige are not confined to elitist institutions conferring the Ph.D., touting the learned professions of theology, law, and medicine, and extolling the excellence of their liberal arts degrees. There is indeed room within the "universe" of higher education for landgrant, state, regional, technological, and other universities to develop distinctive patterns worthy of recognition and emulation.

Purposes and Performance

Distinctive patterns of instruction, research, and service imply that sustained attention has been given to the talents, capabilities, and expertise of faculties and students. University faculties not only teach in various academic disciplines and professional specialties, but the university is the one likely place in our society where we expect to find scientists, scholars, philosophers, artists, writers, musicians, and other professionals actively engaged in the creation of knowledge, its dissemination, and its productive uses. In their pursuit of knowledge, university faculties generate the substance and content of many courses taught by the faculties of four-year and two-year colleges. A higher level of performance thus is expected of university faculty, and unless an institution's faculty is effectively involved in the creation, development, and/or enhancement of knowledge, reservations concerning university status are in order.

. . . is not defined by a single distinctive feature but by a distinctive pattern of instruction, research, and public service . . .

Much the same can be said for university students. Unless a appreciable number of students are fully capable of becoming the next generation of scientists, scholars, and

professionals, further reservations are in order. In no way does this observation cast shadows on the professional or career objectives of other students. It simply recognizes that the recruitment and education of talented or gifted students are important, if not essential, to universities. The pre-professional student is in class with the future graduate student and researcher; both attend classes, we hope, with future novelists, artists, and musicians. Universities, perhaps, are the only institutions that can assemble the comprehensive array of resources, capabilities, special talents, and facilities needed for students in such a "universe" of academic, professional, or career objectives and expectations.

. . . the only institutions that can assemble the comprehensive array of resources, capabilities, special talents, and facilities needed

The diversity of students suggests the possibility that a university's general mission could be designated as the provision of a complete learning environment. Universities are indeed places where both faculties and students should be engaged in learning, where research and scholarship should be evident at all levels of instruction. Research can be defined as studying and learning, just as easily as conducting experiments and publishing journal articles. The faculties of other institutions are commonly believed to have studied in-depth an academic discipline, to have stored its principles and findings, and then transmit their knowledge and wisdom to students who are the only beneficiaries. Such a portrayal of a university faculty would be a travesty.

The advantages of a comprehensive learning environment are supported by research implying that students learn best when given the proper conditions and incentives to learn. Because they learn so much from each other, it is often difficult to specify what they have learned in a specific course, or from a particular faculty member. Even more important for numerous students is access to excellent libraries, laboratories, museums, computer centers, recreational facilities—and dedicated scholars whose teaching interests are congruent with student learning needs and interests.

Faculties contribute significantly and substantially to university reputations, but students and accessibility to learning resources and facilities are essential components of the academic environment and opportunities that higher-level learning skills require. The tools and techniques of disciplined inquiry and achievement require both the hardware of research labs and learning centers—and the software of faculty inspiration and dedication. In such ways, a cogent argument is easily mustered that it is the appropriate combination, or blend of faculties, students, facilities, programs, and services that gives each university its particular identity.

Differential Features

The significant differences between universities and other institutions of higher education include the emphases placed on the applications and uses of knowledge. Universities differ in the sense that knowledge is often brought to fruition in public service programs that are unlikely to be found in four-year and two-year colleges. American research universities maintain a pragmatic stance that society expects useful results to follow the discovery and development of talent and the invention of new methods and techniques.

Given the complexity of social, economic, political, and technological problems confronting society, the university is often regarded as the one institution that ought to have the problem-solving capabilities needed. This feature of universities sometimes suffers from excessive promotion, and it follows at a time when science and technology may be regarded not as a solution to, but as a source of, societal problems. To the contrary, research and public service are often cited by credible authorities as the most distinctive feature of American universities.

In many remarkable ways, American research universities have avoided impalement on the horns of "basic versus applied" dilemmas and have continued to address societal needs for research and development with substantial success. The unique mission and role of universities continue to warrant public support in ways that serve the public interest. Throughout such efforts, the university's historical role and its particular status as a sociocultural institution have sustained its commitments and contributions to public service and technological development.

Status Symbols and Images

Given the likelihood that most universities are "worthy of the name"—what are the most informative indicants that their status and prestige as institutions of higher learning are well deserved? We need not doubt that universities remain distinguished institutions because of their distinctive pattern of research, service, and instruction—and their continuing commitments to graduate and professional education. *If*, however, the success of universities is what catches the attention of lesser

What do universities have that other institutions want?

institutions and spurs their aspirations for university status, we are not foolish to ask: (1) what do universities have that other institutions want?, and (2) what are the essential characteristics all universities should have in order to deserve emulation by, or the envy of, other institutions of higher education?

Institutional *resources* and *reputations* quickly come to mind as answers to the first question. Alexander Astin [2] has identified a virtuous circle in which universities rely on their status and prestige to acquire additional institutional resources. They then use the additional resources to gain additional status and prestige—and with additional status and prestige, they seek again to increase their resources.

Complementary to Astin's virtuous circle is Howard Bowen's[3] revenue theory of educational costs. To wit: in pursuit of academic excellence, prestige, and influence, universities raise all the money they can—and spend all the money they raise. There is no limit, Bowen says, to the amount of money universities can spend for "seemingly fruitful educational ends"—and the cumulative effect of the university's fund raising efforts "is toward increasing expenditures."

the most important characteristic of any university . . . will remain its intellectual & academic integrity.

To answer the question about characteristics meriting emulation or envy, we should consider: (1) the intellectual, academic, and cultural integrity of institutional policies, programs, services, and activities; and (2) the integrity of institutional leadership in administering, governing, and managing a university's various resources and its numerous commitments. Most of us can readily agree that an institution of higher learning's integrity in meeting societal expectations should not be in doubt! And who would deny that a university's commendable resources, talents, and expertise should not be in financial or budgetary jeopardy?

Closing Implications

The pragmatic answers that can be given to the initial question "When are universities worthy of the name?" are numerous and interesting! Universities are indeed the most utilitarian institutions in contemporary society, and they continue to fascinate those of us who—without being accountable for its occasional foolishness—are privileged to observe, study, reflect upon, and write about the university's many common features and significant differences. In closing, we may assume that if all well informed students *of* higher education were asked about the worthiness of any particular university, their answers would include the following:

A UNIVERSITY IS WORTHY OF ITS NAME WHEN:

- A majority of its major constituencies understand and appreciate its mission and role as an institution of higher learning—with or without an eloquent mission statement.
- Curricula include the humanities and fine arts, the physical and biological sciences, the behavioral and social sciences, and professional or applied fields of specialization—and some semblance of design or structure.
- Faculties consist of scholars, scientists, professionals, and other academic specialists who have learned to teach—and who continue to teach and thereby continue to learn.
- Students are appropriately prepared to study and learn what the university is well prepared, staffed, and equipped to teach.
- Alumni understand and apply the truism that the purpose of education is to learn how to learn and to continue learning throughout life.
- Governing boards represent the public interest, as well as the interests of students, faculty, and alumni; serve as a buffer against encroachments on institutional integrity; and ensure a worthy legacy for their successors.
- Heritage, tradition, and current programs create their own vision, give a unique sense of purpose and meaning, and provide a sense of direction and momentum.
- Institutional resources, capabilities, and expertise can recognize lethargy, renew motives and incentives to regain momentum, and re-kindle personal desires for progress.
- Perceived by its many publics as a place of learning, a place of continued study and teaching, and as a time and place in which to study and learn, to grow and develop, and to mature.
- Graduate, professional, undergraduate, general, and specialized programs of study blend effectively, if not harmoniously.
- Buildings and grounds testify that the university's heritage is a continuing part of its presence—and its relevance for the future.
- *Knowledge* will be disseminated—not distributed or delivered; *Competence* will be developed with guidance and supervised practice; and *Understanding* will be the expected outcome of personal experience.
- Academic leadership will be observed and appraised in the "right places"—and not just in the president's office; the personal and professional development of deans and department heads will not be taken for granted; and potential for continued growth and development will be a relevant factor in all administrative appointments.
- Public commitments and contributions will be similar to other universities, but not imitative; imaginative, but not contrived; and observable, but not blatantly publicized.
- Major constituencies will have comparable—if not always consistent—values, beliefs, and opinions concerning education in advanced, specialized, technological, and professional fields of study.
- Most importantly, it displays maturity, if not signs of graceful aging, and undeniable signs of its own capacity for continuing growth and development.

When all discussions of distinctive and differential features are exhausted, the most important characteristic of any university, worthy or not, will remain its intellectual and academic integrity. The financial and/or budgetary integrity of too many universities is needlessly threatened by excessive commercialization—and the absurd notion that information, knowledge, and wisdom(?) are nothing more than commodities to be packed and delivered for profit. No university can sell its integrity for a handsome profit—and thereby generate more integrity for greater profit in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. W.H. Cowley, *Presidents, Professors, and Trustees.* Edited by Donald T. Williams, Jr. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980.

2. Alexander W. Astin, *The Unrealized Potential of American Higher Education.* Athens, GA: Louise McBee Lecture, The University of Georgia, Institute of Higher Education, 1991. *Copies available upon written request from Institute of Higher Education.*

3. Howard R. Bowen, *The Costs of Higher Education: How Much Do Colleges and Universities Spend per Student and How Much Should They Spend?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980.

*See also the following issues of *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*:

"The American Research University" (Fall 1993).

"American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines" (Winter 1997).

"The American Academic Profession" (Fall 1994).

"Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges" (Winter 1999).

*See also Ronald G. Ehrenberg (Ed.), *The American University: National Treasure or Endangered Species?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997; Richard N. Katz and Associates. *Dancing with the Devil: Information Technology and the New Competition in Higher Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

THIS ISSUE . . .

This issue of IHE PERSPECTIVES reflects the biases of an academic lifetime. Having earned degrees from three different universities, the author continues to believe that American universities are indeed "worthy of the name" but too often tempted to sell their "good name" for revenues that do not enhance their resources and reputations.

See IHE Publications at http://service.uga.edu/ihe/

Copyright © 1999 Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602-1772